

IL 10-96-021

In Reply Refer To: 111C

•October 8, 1996

UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH'S INFORMATION LETTER

SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT: STANDARDS FOR A CONTINUUM OF CARE

1. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities will soon receive a Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Program Guide 1103.1 entitled, "Substance Abuse Treatment: Standards For a Continuum of Care." These guidelines, intended for clinical and health care management staff, address the services essential to providing high-quality substance abuse treatment in a cost conscious manner. They need to be used in conjunction with current and future outcome monitors to ensure that veterans in need of care for their substance use disorders and associated psychosocial problems are able to successfully access specialized, quality services.
2. Substance abuse is a significant problem at an individual level and at a societal level. The effects of substance abuse are felt by the abuser, significant others, and by private citizens bearing financial and other costs associated with substance abuse. Total economic costs for alcohol abuse and dependence have been estimated at over \$90 billion (Rice, D.P. The Economic Cost of Alcohol Abuse and Dependence: 1990. Alcohol Health and Research World, 17:10-11, 1993). Costs of illicit drug use are estimated at an additional \$67 billion (Office of National Drug Control Policy. The National Drug Control Strategy: 1966. Washington, DC, 1996).
3. Substance abuse is a significant problem among patients treated by VA. In Fiscal Year 1995, 25 percent of all veterans discharged from VA medical centers had a primary or secondary substance abuse diagnosis. These patients accounted for 33 percent of the total bed days of care provided that year. Twenty-seven percent of veterans discharged from Extended Care Programs had substance abuse diagnoses and patients with substance abuse problems accounted for 18 percent of the outpatient contacts provided by VA (Piette, J. D.; Baisden, K. L.; and Moos, R. H., "Health Services for VA Substance Abuse Patients: Eight-Year Trends in Utilization (Fiscal Years 1988, 1993 and 1995)," published by the Program Evaluation and Resource Center and the HSR&D Center for Health Care Evaluation, Department of Veterans Affairs, Palo Alto, CA, June, 1996).
4. VHA's new mission reflects commitment to meeting the needs of America's veterans while emphasizing high-quality services, consumer satisfaction and cost-efficiencies. In order to accomplish these objectives, we must address the needs of one of VA's largest cohort of patients: veterans with substance abuse disorders. Recognizing this, as well as the fact that VA has developed specialized expertise in treating substance abuse problems, substance abuse has been designated as a special emphasis program (Kizer, K.W. Prescription for Change. Veterans Health Administration, Washington, DC March, 1996).

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5. "Substance Abuse Treatment: Standards for a Continuum of Care" needs to be carefully reviewed and widely disseminated for full implementation.
6. Questions or issues regarding substance abuse treatment services in VA may be addressed to Chief, Mental Health Strategic Health Group (116) or Associate Chief for Addictive Disorders (116B).

S/ by Thomas Garthwaite, M.D. for
Kenneth W. Kizer, M.D., M.P.H.
Under Secretary for Health

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